

Temper

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Without the heat of the forge, even the strongest steel will chip and shatter.

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A thin pall of smoke hung over Konoha. By now, most of the fires that had burned through her residential districts had been extinguished, but that light gray haze still clung tenaciously to existence, serving as a stark reminder of what had just transpired. From where Hiruzen stood in the Hokage's - no, his - office, he could clearly see the devastation that had ravaged his village. Entire districts had been razed to the ground, only burnt-out shells of buildings remaining where vibrant communities had once stood.

Not even the great city walls that surrounded the village had been left unscathed - an entire section in the north had been almost entirely destroyed, rent asunder by truly monstrous degrees of force. Dozens of large stone blocks lay scattered across the village, the dark trails of earth and splintered debris they left behind a clear marker of just how hard they had been thrown.

It was disheartening to look over his village and see what it had once been. Restoring Konoha to her former glory would be no small task.

He sighed, and turned to face his most recent appointment. The young kunoichi standing at attention in front of his desk looked a little dazed, Hiruzen noted. After the events of the past few days, it was understandable. After losing her parents, the other members of her genin team, and her jounin sensei all in one fell swoop, no doubt she would need some time to herself, time to mourn and overcome her grief.

A shame that it was time she could not have.

"Your father," Hiruzen said gravely, "made many enemies in his lifetime."

The girl sniffed a little, nodding dumbly.

"With the... the recent disaster that has befallen our village," he continued, "Konoha finds itself at her weakest state since the end of the last war. While your parents were still alive, their reputation acted as a shield against any attempts at retribution on Iwa's part. But now... if Iwa were to make an attempt on your life as revenge, we would be hard-pressed to muster any sort of resistance. Konoha can ill-afford the losses that such a thing would bring about." He grimaced.

To have to do this to such a young child - his successor's child, at that - was regretful. But no matter how much he disliked what he had to do, no matter how much he would have preferred to be able to preserve this young girl's childhood, his duties to Konoha came first and foremost.

"You were with your team when the Kyuubi attacked, correct?"

She nodded stiffly. "Yes, sir."

"It is a shame," Hiruzen mused softly, "that all three members of Team 12 were killed in action yesterday."

The girl visibly swallowed. "I... I don't understand, Sandaime-sama."

"Namikaze Akiha was a promising young kunoichi, well on her way to a promotion. Unfortunately, her career and her life were abruptly ended before their time. We shall mourn her passing." He paused for a moment and handed her a small scroll, which she accepted morosely. "Welcome to Anbu, agent Crow."

"I... Yes, sir." Akiha sounded close to tears, now. "What about..." She trailed off into silence, unable or unwilling to voice the rest of her question.

It was obvious, though, as to what she was asking after. "Uzumaki Kushina's unborn child did not survive the attack." He paused for a

moment to harden his resolve. "You have the rest of the day to set your affairs in order, Crow. Report to headquarters by midnight. Dismissed."

With those words, Crow all but fled from the room.

And in this way, Sarutobi Hiruzen traded away the childhood of one young genin for the safety of his village and her infant brother.

The streets were completely deserted as Akiha ran home. Most civilians were still in the underground shelters, waiting for someone to give them the all-clear signal, while all available shinobi had been assigned to making temporary repairs to critical infrastructure that had been damaged during the Kyuubi attack. Since all of the damage had occurred to the north, there was no one to see her sprint through Konoha's southern districts.

When she finally reached the modest building she called home, Akiha slumped against the door, gasping quietly for air, her heart thudding dully in her chest. She was exhausted. From the very moment that the alert had sounded almost two days ago, she'd been busy. While genin like herself had, in general, been kept away from the front lines, there had still been work to do - evacuating civilians to the various shelters, keeping watch in place of the Chuunin called up to hold the line, or dousing fires and constructing firebreaks throughout the village - all relatively lighter work.

Not that it had helped, in the end. She and the two other members of her team had been trapped inside a collapsing building, the structure buckling under the stress of the fiery gale-force winds driven by the firestorm that the Kyuubi had ignited. In the end, it had only been due to luck that she'd survived. She'd been trapped by the falling debris, nearly suffocating in the process, and when she'd dug herself out, it had only been to discover that both her teammates had been crushed by the crumbling masonry.

Her home was exactly as she'd left it when she'd been called away by her duties. A bowl of half-eaten food sat forgotten on the table where she'd left it in the frenzied moments when the alert had sounded. Akiha sniffed at it for a moment and grimaced at the putrid smell of rotting food, moving to dump the bowl into the trash before thinking better of the idea and setting the whole thing back on the table. She roughly tossed the scroll the Hokage had given her onto the table where the bowl had been a moment before and collapsed onto the floor with a muffled thump.

For a long time, Akiha simply sat there, staring dully at that damnable scroll on the table. She wanted nothing more than to completely ignore it and everything it stood for, wanted nothing more than to go to sleep and pretend that this nightmare had never come to pass. But no, wishful thinking wouldn't change reality, wouldn't change what the Hokage had asked for her, wouldn't bring back her team or her pa-

Akiha shook her head violently. No, she wouldn't think about that. She wouldn't. The Hokage's words had been clear. As a ninja of Konoha, she had no time for grief or sorrow - her own tenuous position would not permit it. No, it would be for the best if she ignored everything that had come to pass.

The mission scroll opened with a snap, disgorging a small bundle of papers that she slowly looked through. 'Crow' had a background that she was expected to conform to, and so, a copy of her new identity's official profile had been included along with the other papers denoting her rank and mission history. It was, Akiha noted, a decomposition of an entire life into a few sentences.

Okada Inoue. Chuunin. Child of two conveniently deceased merchant parents. Enrolled in the Academy in lieu of studying at a state trade school, and was subsequently pressed into service during the last war. Acquired a field promotion over the course of the war, and was only recently recruited into Anbu. Primary specialties in stealth and intelligence work.

As a matter of standard procedure, Konoha kept a number of profiles on hand at all times for a number of purposes, though, for the most part, they were used as pre-made identities for ninja who, for one reason or another, could not use their own true identity. Sometimes, depending on how carefully the profile had been individually tailored before being assigned, it was possible to end up with something completely unsuitable for the mission it was intended for. Thankfully, this profile's background was close enough to her own that she could use it as was without any undue difficulties, but she'd heard stories.

Not that the profile's suitability really mattered. For better or for worse, she'd be spending the foreseeable future as one Okada Inoue, chuunin of Konoha, veteran kunoichi.

For all his faults, her father had always been a very thorough planner. He'd had a procedure set down for every conceivable circumstance - even one such as this. Not that his strategizing had done him much good, in the end. Still, that meant that she at least had a concrete course of action to fall back upon.

Death in the line of duty was something that every shinobi had to learn to expect. It was a painful lesson that she had learned during her very first mission as a fully fledged genin, during the dying days of the last war.

Three whole teams had been sent to relieve a beleaguered outpost deep in enemy territory. The team of chuunin they had been sent to rescue has already been killed by the time they reached the rendezvous point, and they had only made it back home after three days of heavy fighting, minus four genin and one jounin-sensei, killed in the line of duty.

It had only been through luck and some last-minute assistance that her own team had gone through that ordeal mostly unscathed.

That luck had been nowhere to be found this time.

According to her father's contingency planning, she was to avoid taking combat missions until such time that she was proficient enough to at least escape from whatever situations she found herself in. As the last living member of a major bloodline, it was imperative that she remain alive long enough to be able to either pass on her blood to another generation or protect any siblings who could do so. As part of that, she was to call upon any remaining family resources at her disposal.

The Hokage's orders, however, complicated her tasks quite a bit. There was very little she could do if she was meant to hide in plain sight. For one, it would be very suspicious if someone were to remove all items of interest from the Hokage's residence the day after his entire family supposedly perished.

As it was, she was essentially limited to taking things that were unlikely to fall under the public eye - copies of her parents' research notes into sealing and as much of her mother's personal library of various heirloom techniques that she could remove without arousing suspicion. Not that she could see any way to practice any of them without violating the Hokage's orders, but at least she'd be able to give herself a thorough grounding on the underlying theory.

She took some trinkets as well, a few pieces of jewelry that had been gifts from friends and family, and, after a moment of hesitation, a small framed picture of herself with her parents, smiling for the camera in happier times. One by one, she laid the items down on the kitchen table, forming a pathetic little pile that she carefully stored into a small bag that she slung over her shoulder. Her life, all in one neat bundle.

With her business concluded, she reluctantly turned towards and stepped outside. Just as she stepped through the threshold, she turned around, sparing one last desperate look towards the interior. Akiha stood there for a long moment, trying to burn the image into her mind. She bowed deeply to the empty home.

"Mother, father... I'll be back. Someday. I promise."

With that she turned away. The door shut behind her, and Namikaze Akiha left her home for the last time.